

INCEPTION AND PROGRESS OF THE DANCE IN SRI LANKA

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In common with many arts, the art of dance is also a product of the man who lived in a pre-historical period of the world. So, it is difficult to recognize the evolution of the dance¹. Perhaps we can imagine a phenomenon that a primitive man could be engaged in his activities during his day time and then by night might have recalled them rethinking and repeating them only by imitating actions sitting together with his family members to spend the time and coming out from the depression.

Mr. J.E. Sedaraman scholar artist suggests that some rituals and dances seen in present performances may be an evolution of concepts of pre-historic man's dancing, which had included dance, Singing, and instrumental play.² As Dr. Shiran Daraniyagala suggests, human settlements of pre-historic Sri Lanka are very old as they had gone far beyond 125,000 years of history³. Cave painting found in **Billawa** and **Thanthirimale** includes some figures of men which depict some features of dance in a primitive style. So, these works of art born in a primitive background took steps progressively in their evolution towards the 5th century the great chronicle **Mahavamsa** narrates the story of **Prince Vijaya** and **Kuveni** who met in Sri Lanka, (then Lanka). Prince Vijaya took Kuveni as his spouse and lay for the night, as the night went on, he heard the sound of music and singing, then he asked Yakkini, who was lying near him:

“what means this noise”

And she said to the Prince:

¹ Sedaraman, J. E., Udarata natum kalava, page no.01

² Sedaraman, J. E., Udarata natum kalava, page no.06

³ Daraniyagala, shiran., Sri Lankave Prag Ithihasaya, Page no. 17

“here there is a Yakka city called Sirisavatthu; the daughter of the chief of the yakka who dwells in the city of Lanka has been brought ‘hither, and her mother to comes. And for the wedding, there is a high festival, lasting seven days. There there is this noise.”⁴

So these notes of Mahawamasam reveal important facts on dance and music melodic **Pancha Thoorya** played by Yakkas. Mahavamsam says that **King Pandukabhaya** helped Yakka’s tribe in many ways. Once he was watching dance sitting together with Yakka leaders on parallel seats.

“Year by year he had sacrificial offerings made to them and to other(Yakkas); but on festival day he sat with Chittaraja beside him on a seat of equal height, and having gods and men to dance before him⁵,”

In the evolution of dance in Sri Lanka it shows a remarkable jump in the 3rd century BC. It was encouraged by the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. On this occasion, some guild of art and craft came to this island with **Maharahath Sangamiththa** with the sacred **Bodi tree**.⁶ As a result of their arrival Buddhist celebrations and rituals came into Buddhist temples adding new values and customs to Sinhala society and enlarging the spiritual perception of the Buddhist people. In this new environment, their aesthetic aspirations of them also got into a new path of rituals, beliefs, and celebrations. New features were added to the dance, music, and singing too.

It is clear that there is a word added to the inscriptions registered in years between the 6th century and the 3rd century BC. This term (NATA) represents the meaning, of “ACTOR” and a traditional profession to the dance.

1.Upashaka Nata Thishasha dane.⁷

Actor Tissa’s benefaction

2.Gapathi Nata Vudaha Gapathana- Shamudaya Nata

Chaluya Kdhitha⁸.

Wife of house holder, Actor Waduge who is daughter of

⁴Dr.Geiger, Wilhelm.,Mahavamsam, 7th chapter, page no 57, Stanza 30-35

⁵ Ibid,10th chapter, Page No.74, Stanza 86-88.

⁶ Ibid, 18th chapter, page no.123

⁷ Paranavithana, S.,inscription of Ceylon, Vol. 1, No 642

⁸ Ibid, No.1005

Actor Chalu

3. Bharatha Thishaha Lene Nati kana Shadi Shapathiko⁹.

Cave of Tissa, the chief of the Bharatha dancing team.

In addition to the above inscription historical resources found in Mahavamsa and Dhathuvamsa etc; includes facts on dance. The great chronicle Mahavamsa says that there were grand ceremonies on many events of Maha Stupa (Ruwanvalisaya) in these descriptions information about dancers can be found.

“the king supported, in order of their rank, by many ministers, richly clothed befitted their office. Surrounded by many dancers richly clothed like celestial nymphs, (he himself)”¹⁰

Further Mahavamsam explains the funeral of great King Dutugamunu,

“even where the dancing -women who had come thither laid off their head-ornaments there was a hall built called **MAKUTAMUTTASALA**¹¹”

This incident reminds the fact that the King had given a remarkable place to dancers in his kingdom. These dancers would have been given a chance to remove the head ornament of the king.

The chronicle Dhathuvamsam says¹²;

“Women dancers who are dressed in different clothes and ornaments set out from the royal palace and paid their homage to the relics playing their musical instruments of the quintet at the ceremony organized by King Kawanthissa for Seruwila dagaba.”¹³

⁹ Ibid, No.1011

¹⁰ Mahavamsa, 29th chapter, 23-25 stanza, Page No. 193

¹¹ Ibid, 32nd chapter, 78 stanza, page No.227

¹² Dhathuvamsam, Page No. 21

¹³ Seruwila dagaba was built during the reign of king Kawanthissa (2nd century BC) containing the Lalata Dathun Vahanse (sacred forehead Bone) of Lord Buddha.

After the reign of King Dutugamunu for some years some facts on dance came out during the reign of King Bhathikabhaya. They say that King Bhathikabhaya too did many offerings to Maha Stupa Ruwanveliseya.

“Dancers presented their items performing music and instrumental playing honor to the stupa.”¹⁴

One is the fact found in Cilappatikaram; the epic compiled in South India gives a clue to support the idea that there was an art of the dance in Anuradhapura period. Cilappatikaram says that there was a tradition of dance that was identified as SINHALA in practices exercised in South India by South Indian women dancers¹⁵.

Chinese Monk FAHIEN who visited Lanka reports in his record that he had a chance to view a Tooth Relic procession in which many pictures were displayed and they were depictions of Buddhist Jathaka stories.¹⁶

SIKAVADHAVINISA written in the 10th century and belonged to the Anuradhapura era mentions some lines thus;

“Natanu ev, gayanu ev, Vayanu ev, balaiju ev, Asijju nam yodanu yodavanu kere nam dukula ve”

(all arts, dance, singing, and playing music are prohibited to Bhikkus and were limited to lay life)¹⁷

The art of dance was practiced as a part of “SIV SETA” (sixty-four Art forms). King Parakkramabahu the great, was a leader who learned dance and patronized the dance. His queen Roopawathi was honored with the title “NACHCHA GEETHA KUSALATHA”. (expert in dance and singing).

¹⁴ Mahavamsam, 34 chapter, 60th stanza, Page No.242

¹⁵ Darmadasa, K.N.O.,Sinhala sahithyen Pilibibu vana Narthana Kalava, page No. 2

¹⁶ Report of Fahien, page No 15

¹⁷ Mahavamsam, 73rd chapter, 82-85 stanza, Page No.339

The stone inscription of King Nissanka Malla reveals that he patronized dance and music too. The inscription carved in the stone seat established as “KALA KREEDA” (Art and Sport) at the place near the tank Thopaveva says;

“This is the seat for watching amusement”

In this wording, Kala Kreeda means, perhaps which includes the sixty-four art forms Prof. Senarath Paranavithana suggests¹⁸.

King Parakkramabahu II who ruled from Dambadeniya in the 13th century AD arranged ceremonial performances of dance and music in honor of and worship to the Tooth relic of the Buddha. The great chronicle explains its grandeur;

“Many items of dance, many sweet voices of singers, different moves of dancing were enlivened by melodies, presented in the pavilion”¹⁹.

Mayura Sandeshaya (Messenger poetry) which was compiled during the reign of Bhuvanekabahu V in the 14th century, poetically adds the beauty of dances and its high recognition.

“VAYAN NAN PADEILA THABA PA GIYANNE
AGIN NAN RAGANNAN SURAN YAI SITHANNE”

*“Footing follow by the tunes of music players
Dancing girls take different steps
Anyone think these are divine ladies
Seeing these beauties what does the world say
Sure, even cupid is a minion of them”²⁰*

Another literary compilation, Thisara sandeshaya a product of gampola reign includes some dancing events in poems.

¹⁸ Kulathunga, T.G., Sri Lanka narthana kalava, Page no 29

¹⁹ Mahavamsam, 85th chapter, 42-44 stanza

²⁰ Mayura sandeshaya, Edition. Liyanaarachchi, R.A., poem no 128, page no 48

NIYENAGA BHARATHADURAN KEE LESATA
BASA RANGA THAMA NATHU PADAYEHI PIHITA

*“Women dancers get into dance as following terms(foot)
As Bharatha Guru has recommended
Casting at eye end look in every direction
Performs her actions like Ishwara does in dance”²¹*

The Kotte epoch is the golden time of Sinhala literature as well the rise of art of the dance. The episode of “UDENI PURA SANAKELIYA” – The festival held in the city of Udeni in Guththilakavya compiled by Watthawe Thero is a copy of a real arena perhaps witnessed by the Thero. Many messenger poetries compiled in the Kotte period include royal or temple dance performances in their eulogies. In this context, PARAVI, SALALIHINI, KOKOLA, HANSA, AND GIRA POETRIES are appreciable. The eulogy compiled to Paravi Sandeshaya of Rahula Thero the poet is very attractive and interesting. Perhaps this may be a picture of the court of King Parakumba VI in which a group of dancers is elaborated.

SULU KULU MEVAN NALU NALAGANA KAN SARANGA
BALA RANGA MADALA PAREVIYA SADA PAHA SARANGA

*GROUP OF DANCES WHO LOOK VERY BEAUTIFUL
FLOWERS ON THEIR HEAD, WITH THE FRAGRANCE²²*

RANGA ADURAN HAKI KISI NOVEE THALAYA
NALAGANA DUTA RAGADENA EKA THALAYA

THE DANCERS DANCE WITHOUT ANY MISTAKE

²¹ Thisara sandeshaya, Edition. Gunawardhana, V.D.S., poem No 171, Page No. 187

²²Paravi Sandeshaya, editionLiyanaarachchi, R.A.Poem no.167,Page No.153

*EVEN THE TEACHERS DID NOT HAVE TO ADVISE AS THE DANCERS
MAINTAINED THEIR PERFECTION*²³

So, these facts and information confirm the availability of well-organized art of the dance as well as trained teachers to guide performance.

Kokila Sandeshaya which was compiled by Ven. Irugal Kulathilaka during the Kotte reign includes a delightful performance of dance.

NAGAMIN ATHA ELABIN RAGA RAGA BALU MANDI
RAGAMIN SITI NALABUNBALA LELADENA RAN BANDI
*“Let the hands rise up from dance to dance
Looking at that wearing shiny bangles
Women dance, you pl look at that”*²⁴

Hansa Sandeshaya which is compiled by Weedagama Maiththri there also presents episodes of dance depicting the capabilities of actresses who had followed Bharatha Natya Shashtra and their enthusiasm for dance. The poem as we present brief eulogies;

BHARATHA SATHARA RAGATAMA KALA HASA LAMA
VAYANA NOHARA MADDALA SUDDHA THALAMA
*ACCORDING TO THE ART OF BHARATHA'S NATYA SHASHTRA
THE MADDALA AND CYMBOL PLAYED*²⁵

RAGANA RAGA ERANGA BIMA SODURU VIDULIYA
RAGANA RAGA VANNA GANA KULEHI VIDULIYA
RAGANA DANA NUWAN DAGA RUSIRU IDULIYA
RAGANA LOBA NARABA RAGA OVUNA IDULIYA

HOW IT IS DANCE ON THE STAGE

²³ Ibid, Poem no.182, Page No. 162

²⁴ Kokila sandeshaya, edition,gunawardana, W.F.,Poem No.281

²⁵ Hansa sandeshaya, Edition. Liyanaarachchi, R.A., poem No 110, Page No.34

ACTRESS IS LIKE LIGHTING IN RAINY CLOUDS
SHAKING MEN EYESIGHT THEY DANCE SEEKING IT
DIVINE ACTRESSES' BEAUTIES OF SAKKRA DISMISS THEIR DESIRE TO
DANCE ²⁶

All these episodes coming in Sandesha kavya collectively disclose a successful path of the dance starting from the Anuradhapura period Polonnaruwa, Dambadeniya, Gampola, Kurunagala, and entered into Kotte where the dance flourished.

But unfortunately, the academic inspiration of the dance was diminished during the epoch of Kandy due to political unrest and conflicts between kings and other leaders. Even though the situation was worst, Poet ALAGIYAWANNA MUKAVATI compiled SAWUL SANDESHAYA and did not forget to present his "NALAGA RAGUM" (DANCE OF ACTRESSES) in 8 poems numbered 179-186.

The long journey of dance in Sri Lanka which started in the historical period of the country has passed many centuries up to now. At first, the people of Sri Lanka mastered the art of dancing to worship the supernatural powers in the Royal palaces. In the 4th century BC locals use dancing as a means to expel natural calamities. At the time of the Polonnaruwa epoch Sri Lanka was highly influenced by South Indian culture. In search of dance evolution, one can observe some engrained marks in it and having a long history of the dance, this has smoothly mixed with Indian culture and it has deeply rooted in general folk life in Sri Lanka.

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